SURAKSHA



Early Childhood Care and Education in India

MOVING UP TO SCHOOL



Community Preschools for the Rural Poor

S.J.P. Karikalan

PWDS, Martandam

The SURAKSHA Series

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Volume 6

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Community Preschools for the Rural Poor

by

S.J.P. Karikalan



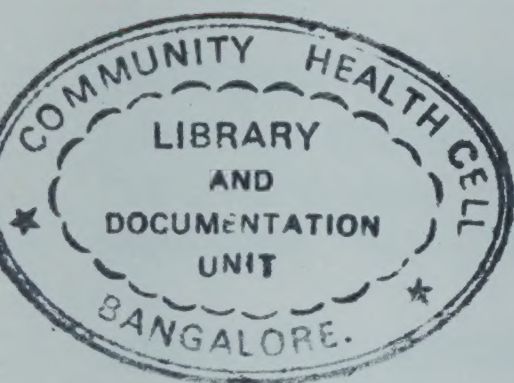
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FOREWORD

Every human being ultimately is the product of interaction between the genotype (inherent genetic make up) and the environment. While heredity determines potential, the home, health and educational environment determine whether young children bloom or remain "blossoms in the dust". There is a well-known saying - *as the twig is bent, so the branch will grow.* It is in this context that Early Childhood Care and Education assume critical significance with reference to giving the child an enabling environment for the full expression of his/her innate potential for physical and mental development.

I am happy that through the SURAKSHA series of publications, a careful chronicling of the many excellent examples of Early Childhood Care and Education in India is being undertaken. This series will enable scholars and researchers as well as policy makers and practitioners to learn from the rich diversity of experience available within our country in this field. Such an understanding is fundamental to learning from successes and thereby helping to replicate effective and economically viable models of day care.

This series has been lovingly put together and is the result of close cooperation among the many people who have worked hard on it. On behalf of the Foundation, I must particularly thank the members of the Advisory Committee, who have given unsparingly of their time and effort, the distinguished scholars who have written the case studies, the agencies whose work has been documented and the Aga Khan Foundation (India) for their support.

M.S. Swaminathan

EDITOR'S NOTE

The SURAKSHA series has grown from an idea which has been germinating for a long time. Scholars have long felt the need for documentation of Early Childhood Education Care and Education programmes in India. While there has been a wealth of experience in the country, with many small-scale experiments under the leadership of outstanding thinkers and educational leaders, it has been realised that hardly any of it has been recorded for a wider public.

The vast diversity in the situations of women and children in the country implies that child care services, especially day care, would vary widely in response to local and specific needs. At the same time, programmes for young children, by their very nature must be highly personalised, direct, small in scale, and rooted in local culture and relationships. Diversity and responsiveness to needs are hence an essential characteristic of successful programmes for young children. In the last two decades, with the rapid expansion of child care programmes like the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in the State sector, it has become all the more important to draw the attention of policy makers to the importance of the flexibility and responsiveness represented by these multiple approaches. Documentation has thus emerged as an essential tool for advocacy.

It was with the twin objectives of dissemination and advocacy that Project ACCESS embarked in 1993, with the support of the Aga Khan Foundation (India), on the project entitled **Multiple Approaches in ECCE in India**, with a view to bringing out a series of studies documenting innovative approaches to ECCE in India. Dr.T.S.Saraswati, Head, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, M.S. University of Baroda, who has for long been urging the need for such documentation, was an incomparable guide and adviser in launching the project. With the help of an Advisory Committee consisting of distinguished representatives from several disciplines, ranging from Child Development and Education to Management and Women's Studies, criteria were drawn up for

selection of programmes to be included in the series and procedures were developed for a participatory process of documentation.

The series of case-studies represents a wide range of experiences in terms of geography, auspices and structure. The locations range from the Himalayan region to the coastal South, from industrial metropolis to rural or tribal hamlets. The programmes are run by diverse institutions — voluntary agencies, trade unions, educational institutions and women's groups. The programmes include spontaneous private efforts as well as statutory obligations and government / non-government partnerships; they are employer-funded and union-sponsored, school-based or community based. The common element is a commitment to address the intersecting needs of women, young children and girls. In addition, each programme is need-based, client-oriented and responsive, a system of optimal size with a minimum life of three years, caters to lower socio-economic groups and is non-profit making in nature. The series title SURAKSHA was chosen for its rich resonance implying an all-embracing, nurturant care, visually represented in the logo; while the colour of each cover is intended to evoke the specific geographical context.

The process of developing the studies has been a participatory one, involving a researcher/writer working closely with the agency concerned, and providing opportunities for sharing and mutual learning among the agencies through a network and occasional meetings. The studies are process-oriented in nature and not merely descriptive, focussing both on the unique features and the replicable aspects of each programme, finances, sustainability, the child care worker, the organisational structure and relevant linkages. The concluding part in each case dwells on implications of the programme for wider policy initiatives for young children.

This study describes an experiment which is one aspect of a programme of total development of an oppressed and marginalised community -- the toddy tappers of the coastal areas of South India. An offshoot of a larger programme of community development through participatory action, it was a response to the felt need of

the community, the articulation of an intuitive perception of illiterate parents that preschool was the first step on the road to educational success. Built up with community support, the programme also has some weaknesses arising from the community's limited perceptions -- the preschool curriculum may not be acceptable to specialists in child development, even though it meets the aspirations of the parents. Yet, it is community participation that has fuelled the extraordinary mobilisation of resources to fund the programme and the ingenuity and skill displayed in marshalling them. How then can these conflicts be reconciled? Who is the arbiter of quality, and on behalf of whom? Which criteria are relevant?

Once more, the teacher, or child care worker, comes to the forefront of this picture. For here, it is evident that the sincerity, care and commitment of the worker has played a more significant role in the overall development of the child than the nature of the curriculum or the extent of her training. And this commitment in turn grows out of her motivation, self-esteem and valued status in the community, all carefully nurtured by the organisation she works for. What does that cost? These intervening variables are hard to price in terms of the market, though cost is still related to quality. Both academics and administrators will find much to ponder over in thse paradoxes and revelations.

August 1995

Mina Swaminathan
Series Editor



MOVING UP TO SCHOOL

COMMUNITY PRESCHOOLS FOR THE RURAL POOR

ABOUT THIS VOLUME

The Author

S.J.P. Karikalan, who has a Master's degree in Education and an M.Phil in English Literature, was for some time the Head of the Dept. of Languages in the Ministry of Education, Nigeria. Presently the administrator of DATA, Madurai, he is involved in rural development work and networking of NGOs in South Tamilnadu.

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1 THE CONTEXT

Kindergartens, creches and day-care centres may be a normal way of life for the middle-class urban child, but is a rarity to the young child of the rural poor. Though the ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) has proved that investing in child development goes a long way in developing human resources, the primary educational needs of rural children are often neglected in favour of higher education. Many NGOs, however, are attempting to establish pre-primary schools in rural areas.

It is precisely in this context that the community-based model of preschool programme developed by the Palmyrah Workers' Development Society (PWDS) is of great significance. The approach of PWDS to the care and education of young children of palmyrah workers and other rural artisans is pragmatic and need-oriented, and could be an alternative model for the rural poor. The main objective of PWDS is to improve the socio-economic conditions of the weaker sections of the rural mass, especially palmyrah tappers and other rural artisans, by inviting them to participate in their own development, thus leading to the development of the nation. The thrust is on community organisation for participatory development, with emphasis on social justice, awareness education, community participation and self-reliance. The identified needs, the response of the people, insights and skills acquired from experience and the availability of human and financial resources are some of the major factors determining the growth of each phase.

Poverty in abundance?

The year was 1977. Dr. Samuel Amirtham was travelling to his home town Parasala passing through Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari districts. A humanitarian and socially concerned activist as he was, the sorry plight of the palmyrah workers amidst the abundant palmyrah trees on either side of the road, raised several questions in his mind. This concern paved the way for the establishment of the Palmyrah Tappers Study project in 1977, which made a detailed survey on the socio-economic condition of the palmyrah workers. Even while the survey was in progress, PWDS was formed and registered in August 1977 (Appendix 1)

The palmyrah tree, which grows in the states of Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Kerala and Karnataka, is an important one among the sugar-yielding varieties of the palm family. The trees are usually very tall, each measuring from 90 to 100 feet in height. The palmyrah industry, known for its economic potentialities, is one of the oldest traditional village industries in the country, and is



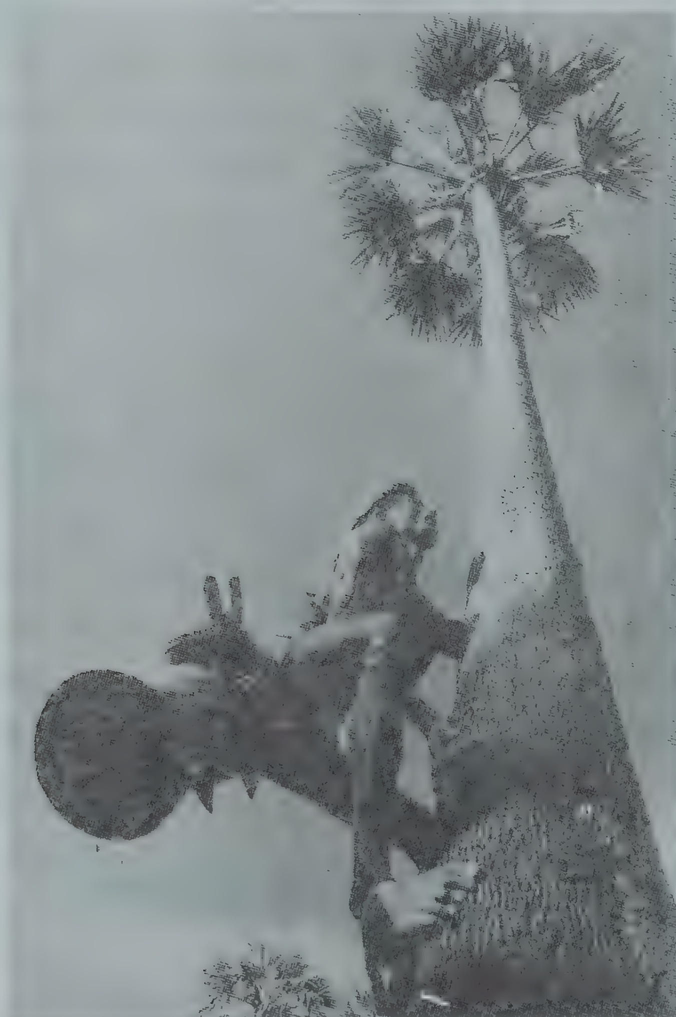
Fig.1 Kanya Kumari Dist. in Tamil Nadu (Inset : Tamil Nadu, India)

responsible for the production of a number of edible and non-edible products. The root is used for basket-making, the timber for house construction, cot-making and walking sticks, the petiole of the young tree for fencing of gardens and the leaf for roofing, packing and manufacture of fancy articles. *Neera*, tender fruits, ripe fruits, edible roots, jaggery, candy, sugar and liquid jaggery are some of the edible products.

Tough and risky job

The palmyrah workers inherit tapping as an occupation and as no major change is likely in the employment market for alternative occupations, this may remain their major occupation for many years to come. Their problems are complex as they are occupational as well as social and economic in character. The per capita income is well below the poverty line.

Very few tappers own palmyrah trees, the trees being taken either on lease or on '*varam* system' (50:50 sharing basis). Tapping is not only a laborious task, but climbing a palmyrah tree involves a lot of risk. A skilled process requiring concentration, it calls for physical strength and energy to climb 30 to 40 trees in a single day. The monetary benefits for such a risky job are very low. Added to this, their families are large, creating problems of food and employment, and their meagre income is not adequate to support them. This causes exploitation of labour and results in



Climbing to work



Daily chore with smoke galore

hungry households. They are unfortunately not able to find additional employment, lacking both strength and opportunity to do other jobs. Since palmyrah is a seasonal crop, it offers full employment for a period of five months only; so during the off-season, the workers take up coolie work or migrate to other districts for tapping, which is not well-paying either. The tappers are, therefore, trapped in a cycle of poverty.

Too tired to think/change

Palmyrah workers have little social life and keep to traditional modes of living. Their children are ill-clad and under-fed. They live in poorly-built houses with just one or two rooms, which includes the kitchen. Lack of sanitation and unhygienic food contribute to the poor health of the women and children. The process of making jaggery, which is still in its primitive form, takes place within the household itself. The entire family of the worker is involved in boiling the *neera*. Since dry leaves and cashew shells are used as substitutes for fire-wood, and as there is no chimney in the house for the outlet of smoke, the entire soot settles on the unplastered walls, and the dense smoke is inhaled by the wives and children of the artisans. As the whole day is occupied in this process, the women and children sometimes find no time to even have a bath. Malnutrition, and their living conditions, make them vulnerable to all kinds of diseases. What intervention would be meaningful to them?

2 THE PROCESS

Help our children to learn

The planning of a community-based programme should stem from the needs of the community. Besides those which are felt by the community, there are other critical needs, the importance of which has not been identified by them; and in such cases, it becomes necessary to sensitise the community to these needs, perhaps through attitudinal changes brought about among parents and communities through education programmes. The need for preschool education was one such requirement that found expression when some social workers approached the tappers.

The Report on the socio-economic conditions of the palmyrah workers, published by PWDS in 1978, also revealed, among other factors, the total neglect of the educational needs of the children in rural areas. To quote from the survey Report -

The palmyrah workers are very backward in education, which may be attributed to their social and cultural backwardness too. As they are generally ignorant of things, they become the target of exploitation in society. Since most of them do not have basic education, they consider themselves as inferiors in society.

Table 1. **Literacy levels of palmyrah workers**

Level	Percentage
Elementary	30.0
Higher elementary	6.0
High school	0.5
Illiterate	63.5
Total	100.0

But behind these figures lay a powerful yearning for education. Though these workers had little or no formal education, they recognised its importance, wanted to educate their children and hoped to improve their social status in the long run.

Causes for illiteracy

Nearly 70% of the workers pointed out that their low income made it impossible for them to educate their children. But it should not be concluded that low income is the only obstacle to the education of their children. When workers were persuaded to explain why they did not send their children to school, two different kinds of answers were obtained. One version was that the elder child was retained at home to look after the younger ones, and

the other was that children were sent as coolies to work in cashew processing units to supplement the income of the family. They are fully aware that this state of affairs is detrimental to their future, and realise that they will be at a disadvantage because of illiteracy.

In a tapper's family, the husband goes out for tapping morning and afternoon. The wife helps him in collecting *neera* (palm juice), and also collects firewood for the boiling of *neera* to make jaggery. The eldest daughter, often herself of preschool age, has to mind her infant sibling while her mother goes out to work. This is doubly disadvantageous. Herself in need of care, she is deprived of schooling, while the infant deserves better care. Since day care centres were not available in rural areas,the children had to walk to distant places crossing many hurdles like streams and slushy paddy fields. For girls, especially, the long distance is one of the reasons for non-enrolment. Repeated demands from the Women's Movement for locating child care centres within or near the girls' schools have not been taken up. Further, parents tend to view costs of schooling their girls as high.

Both boys and girls were put to work at an early age in their own small farms and in the tapping industry itself. They work from early morning, collecting either fire-wood or palm-juice and helping in the process of converting the palm juice into jaggery. Children of preschool age were left wandering around, causing nuisance to parents and neighbours.



Armed for work



Girls play their part

The first response

Responding to the needs of the community and aware that the early years of a child's life are crucial years for its future education and that the physical, social, emotional and psychological needs of the young child could be effectively fulfilled through early childhood education, PWDS identified 10 educated girls from villages and motivated them to start the first community preschool centres, in January 1978, with free food from CASA (Churches Auxiliary for Social Action). The objectives then were:

• To function as a day-care centre to relieve the rural working mothers from the burden of baby-sitting.

• To prepare, motivate and facilitate the children to go to school and to reduce drop out at the primary and secondary stage.

It was not easy for the preschool teachers to enrol the children. The tappers had to be convinced of the need for preschool as a step to school. The link between preschool and formal education had yet to be established. Besides, the educated and the well-to-do in the community did not encourage the tappers to send their children to elementary school. 90% of children under 10 years did not attend any school and the rest attended those run by the Roman Catholic Church. The parents who wanted to send their children to school couldn't have afforded books. Detention in classes also affected parents' attitudes, but the relentless efforts and the conviction of the teachers began to yield results.

The relentless efforts of the teachers began to yield results.

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3 THE BLOSSOMING

By June 1978, 17 feeding centres were supported by CASA, apart from the pre-school centres (without feeding) with more than 1,000 children on roll. In the feeding centres, 105 gms of wheat and 18 gms of soya bean oil was provided to each child per day. Wheat rava was made into *uppuma* mixed with soyabean oil. The programme was run so successfully that CASA recognised PWDS as its contact organisation for its Mother and Child Health (MCH) programmes. By June 1980, the number of preschool centres increased to 76 and by 1981, a close contact was established with 3,000 families through 90 preschool centres.

This number peaked in 1990 to 123 centres (Fig.2). Unemployed local girls, preferably tappers' daughters, with high school qualifications were trained as health workers at the Kottar Social Service Society and they later took charge of the preschool and feeding centres. The teachers also attended a crash orientation course for 10 days in Madurai to learn the basic concepts of education, teaching methodologies, book-keeping and child psychology. The resource persons were mostly social workers, counsellors and educationists associated with NGOs. The teachers were involved in the nursery for half a day and they spent the rest of the day visiting tappers' women-folk. Here, they made them aware of health and hygiene, the importance of prenatal medical care, which they could get from primary Health Centres, and the relevance of postnatal care to bring down child mortality to the barest minimum. PWDS was able to gain an entry point and establish a rapport with the families of palmyrah tappers and other rural artisans through such programmes.

The growth of the preschool centres also strengthened the women's programmes, health education and other allied activities of PWDS. Parents' meetings were held once in six months. The parents evinced keen interest and tremendous enthusiasm for such meetings where several issues related to women and children such as women's education, gender rights, economic backwardness of women, employment for women, dowry menace, thrift and savings were discussed.

Initially 50 paise per month from each child was collected in centres giving food and 25 paise in non-food centres. The amount thus collected was used to give sweets during festival times. The beneficiaries' contribution alone amounted to Rs.7,161.25 during 1980-81. At about this time, food aid from abroad was stopped and from 1980 to 1982 CASA supplied milk powder instead. The health workers in charge of preschool centres were relieved for full time work in the Women's



Fig.2 Growth of preschool centres

Programme and voluntary child care workers with high school education were selected. Only an allowance of Rs.30/- per month was given to them, not a salary. Parents were encouraged to pay a small fee ranging from Rs.2/- to Rs.5/- to the teacher as their contribution from the community. This fee collection along with the PWDS allowance was a motivating factor for the child care workers. Deserving women, especially widows, were appointed as *ayahs* (helpers).

Food for the mind or the body?

In 1982, the Tamil Nadu Government initiated the Midday Meals Programme for school-going and preschool children, a massive statewide welfare programme which still provides the children with at least one nutritious meal a day, including Sundays. Due to the immediate impact of this scheme, fifteen centres were withdrawn in 1982 to avoid duplication, and another five centres in 1983. A dilemma arose whether to continue the day-care centres or close them down, since the Government was making alternative arrangements.

CASA also stopped the supply of milk powder as the project was over and hence all the food centres were merged with the Government Noon Meal Centres. The concerned preschool teachers wanted to run their centres as non-food centres, but most of the parents opted for a meal for their children. Hence, all such centres were closed and the teachers were found jobs in other centres. The focus henceforth was on education and not on food. After consultations with the community on the issue, it was decided to start new centres only on request from areas where the Government had not started Noon Meal Centres. But some guidelines were formed for either starting a new day-care centre or retaining the existing ones.



Mothers eke out a living

Fresh territories - some guidelines

The remoteness of the area, participation from the people and the qualification and aptitude of the teacher from the local area, were factors taken into account while deciding the opening of a centre. The village should be able to provide a place free of cost for running the centre, and the minimum number of children in each centre should be twenty. Only remote areas with no access to the Noon Meal scheme should be selected. Even those preschool teachers who had centres near their residences had to shift their centres to deserving areas two to three kilometres away from their residence. Since most of the parents were also worried about the education of their children as well as the nutrition aspect, a working arrangement was negotiated between the Noon Meal Centres and the preschool teachers. There are about ten such centres of PWDS even today where the children get preschool education and then go for a meal to the Government centres.

The teachers were given periodic in-service training to make them aware of the socio-economic trends of modern times, in addition to refresher courses in child education. Monthly seminars for teachers were conducted by college professors and PWDS staff who served as resource persons.

For rainy days

In September 1984, a Savings Scheme for the mothers of the children was started. Since the tappers' work was seasonal, and there were not many alternative jobs, it was felt that saving for the lean period would come in handy and alleviate their sufferings. Moreover, there was no saving habit among the tappers and they usd to borrow heavily from greedy moneylenders at high interest rates ranging from 36 to 100% per annum. The dowry system also made them debtors. Hence, as a development intervention, PWDS introduced the savings scheme for the mothers. To start with, the mothers were motivated to keep aside a handful of rice (*Pidi Arisi*) everyday as savings in kind to help them feed family members during the off-season. As the scheme took momentum, the mothers were encouraged to save money.

Twenty-eight preschool teachers came forward to serve as animators to encourage more mothers to join the scheme. 918 mothers from rural areas willingly joined the scheme. The idea was to collect a minimum of Re.1 a day from each member and deposit the amount in the bank. Amazingly, the total collection from September to 31st March 1985, was Rs 1,36,440.70. When the first Annual Meeting of the Savings Scheme was held in September '85, there were 1,620 depositors who had put in Rs 2,54,885 /- as their savings for the whole year. The Scheme also strengthened the bond between PWDS and the tapper community. It was then decided to give the teachers an incentive allowance of 4% of the money collected through savings. Thus the scheme helped the teachers also to earn additional income.

The savings scheme is not interest-based but incentive-based. The members do

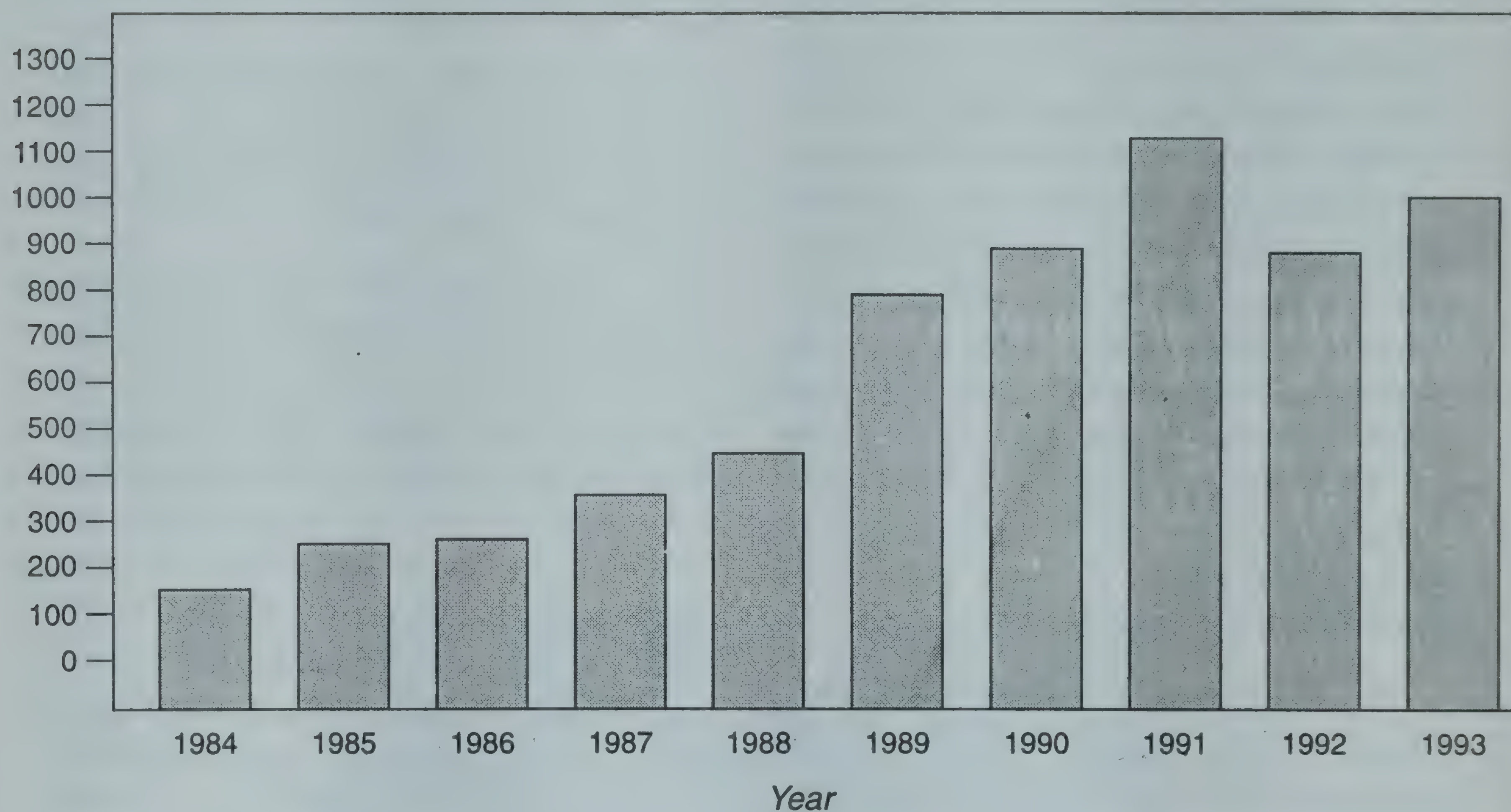


Fig.3 Growth of savings scheme

Table 2 **Growth of the movement**

Years	Total no. of children	Total savings (Rs.)	Number of preschools
1989-90	2,793	7,88,650	120
1990-91	3,068	8,93,464	123
1991-92	3,150	11,23,855	123
1992-93	2,953	8,87,206	122
1993-94	2,605	10,13,208	106

not expect any loans from their savings nor are they worried about the interest. The interest earned from the bank for the savings is distributed as incentive for the teachers and for the members who save more than Rs. 1000/- per year. (Fig.3)

Breaking down narrow domestic walls

The mothers' meetings, held once a month, discuss various topics on child psychology, health and hygiene, environment, family planning, budgetting, nutrition and small savings. Since the mothers constitute a changing group, it was suggested that they have a permanent structure formed at the village level. In some villages, they have been willing to form a village organisation and bring under it all the developmental activities.

As on 31st March 1994, there are 106 pre-school centres with 2,605 children on roll. Most of the centres enjoy financial support from PWDS in the form of a teacher's allowance and minimum materials. 3,898 mothers, including mothers of former preschool students and other village women, have joined as members of the Savings Scheme, saving Rs 10,13,208/- during 1993-94. (Table 2)

Around 3898 families participated in the Savings Scheme and on an average each mother has saved Rs.260/- per annum which comes to around Rs.21.70 per month. Since the womenfolk are sellers of *neera* and jaggery and also take up coolie work in brick making, tailoring and beedi making, the little cash flow in their hands, rightly motivated and jointly ventured, has resulted in a staggering saving amount of more than Rs.10 lakhs per year.

The growth of the preschool centres also strengthened the women's programmes, health, education and other allied activities.

4 THE PRESCHOOLS AT WORK

Preschool facilities

What is the broad picture of preschools today? Table 3 shows the percentage distribution of various preschool parameters such as location, ownership of building, seating facilities, working hours and monthly fees.

Table 3 **Preschool facilities**

Location of school	
Village	94.18
Town	5.82
School buildings	
Owned	40.00
Rented	60.00
Seating facilities	
Mats	93.75
Chairs	5.00
Floor	1.25
Working hours	
Below 3 hours	46.60
3-5 hours	40.90
Above 5 hours	12.50
Monthly fees	
Rs. 2	6.19
Rs. 3	1.23
Rs. 5	91.35
Rs. 10	1.23

Note : All figures in percentages

It is interesting to note that the community is by and large prepared to provide the necessary infrastructural support to make the programme a success.

A typical preschooler

It was the dawn of another day for the residents of Serukaravilai, a small hamlet near Marthandam, mostly inhabited by palmyrah tappers and agricultural labourers. Shyla Rani, a four-year-old girl, got up with sleepy eyes from the torn mat. Her father, a coolie working in a rubber sheet shop, was getting ready for work. Her mother who does odd jobs now and then for a paltry sum doled out in the name of wages, was busy preparing food for the family. The menu for the day is boiled tapioca roots to go with pond fish curry. Their usual midday meal is tapioca boiled with palmyrah juice. Shyla has an elder sister and two younger brothers. Her elder sister was baby-sitting for Shyla and the brothers till six months ago. Now promoted to the office of house-keeping, she shouted orders at Shyla to wake up her two younger brothers and clean them up. The cleaning done, Shyla with one boy on her hip and holding another by hand, went to the nearby temple to play. It was also her duty to feed her brothers at meal times. This has been her daily routine for the past six months, until the day when Miss

K.Chandramathi, a single woman with a School Leaving Certificate who works as a preschool teacher, encountered Shyla Rani playing with her brothers under a tree near the temple. Had this been her first experience, Chandramathi would have been shocked to see the children in such squalid conditions. But used to encounters of this kind, the teacher requested Shyla to escort her to the hut. It was an arduous task for Chandramathi before she could convince Shyla's parents to send the children to the preschool. Who would look after the two-year-old kid, was the problem posed. When it was explained to them that the day care centre was the answer, the parents very reluctantly sent the children to the preschool. It was a memorable experience for Shyla Rani, dressed up in her best clothes, going to school with her elder sister and younger brother, with excitement writ large on their faces. Chandramathi has twenty five such children enrolled for 1994, their age level ranging from 2 to 5 years. The average daily attendance is 23. The school is housed in a small verandah of a house given by the village community for free use. The floor of the verandah is plastered with clay with a generous coat of cow dung smeared over it.

Exposure to a new world

The preschool starts at 9.30 in the morning, with common worship. Songs, praising God the Almighty, are sung in chorus followed by a short prayer recited together from memory. No reference is made to any particular God or religion. The teacher tells a moral story, followed by recitation of rhymes in English and the vernacular. Then the teacher unfolds the number chart and alphabet chart supplied to the school free of cost by PWDS and sets the mood for some learning to take place. While the older children repeat numbers and alphabets, the smaller ones try to imitate them.They have plenty of outdoor activities too.Chandramathi joins them in their fun and frolic. The parents are so happy about the change in the mental and moral attitude of their children, that they have come forward to pay a monthly contribution of Rs.5/- to the school.

In a year or two, the school will become self- reliant. – Chandramathi.

Exciting the child's curiosity

Though the teaching is very informal and flexible, the focus is on making the children learn the three 'R's. For the new entrants, the alphabet in Tamil and English are taught orally. In the second year, they learn to write the alphabets. They are also exposed to some general knowledge by learning the names of animals, birds, fruits, vegetables, names of transport, colours and shapes.

The teacher also makes the students answer a few simple questions in English, and

The parents are so happy about the change in the mental and moral attitude of their children

a child who has regularly attended the centre for two years will be able to answer simple questions in English.

Formal greetings like *Good Morning* and *Good Evening* and courteous responses like *Thank you* and *I am sorry* are taught. Occasionally they are taken out of their class room and into the countryside for a nature walk. The children observe the trees, plants and insects around them and learn their names. In the afternoons, it is mostly painting and enjoying minor games. The children get into the habit of working and playing together and are equipped to enter primary school.

Why teach the alphabets and numbers in the English language when in fact the children will be admitted in Tamil medium primary schools? – the teacher was asked.

Taken aback for a moment and then contemplating for a while, Chandramathi replied –

Well, what else to teach? That is what the parents want. Won't the English language help them in future? Is there any other alternative? This is what we have been doing for years together.

Community support

Mrs. A.Kamalabai, a trained Tamil Pandit, who has been a preschool teacher for ten years in a school housed at Payanam Church building has a nine-year-old mentally retarded child on roll. Annie was brought to the school by her mother when she was five years old. She looked horrible and dirty with saliva dribbling



Open air classroom

from the mouth and mucus playing hide and seek in her nostrils.

Her father, being a drunkard, does not take care of the family. Annie's mother is a maid-servant. Now, after 4 years in the preschool, Annie looks very neat and tidy. She is even able to read and write a little and recite rhymes. Though Kamalabai is very affectionate to all the thirty-three children in the school, she is especially proud of Annie.

This centre is a typical example of the participation of the community, the Church relating with a voluntary development organisation. The Payanam Church has provided accommodation, furniture and other amenities free of cost. The Church also pays the electricity charges and provides free food for the seventy-year-old widow who works as an *ayah* in the school. The *ayah* has been with the school for more than 10 years, with a monthly allowance. She has a handicapped daughter who fends for herself working in a cashewnut factory. The teacher finds the *ayah* very cooperative and trustworthy.

Mixed reactions

But not all mothers could be so easily motivated. Mrs.Thangabai, a parent of Therivilai centre, for example, is willing to pay a monthly contribution of Rs.5/- if lunch is provided in the school. If not, she would prefer to put her children in the Noon Meal Centres. When questioned, she said that her husband did some coolie work now and then and received wages mostly in kind and not money.

Why shouldn't I make use of the Government welfare measures – she quipped.

Her two boys, Rathish (four years old) and Ramesh (two and a half years) have shown a great deal of improvement after joining the preschool. But as a mother, she prefers to see them eat well.

Mrs. Jeyanthi has a different story to tell. Her son Livin (six years) was in Therivilai centre for three years and now he is doing very well in the Government Middle School, Paravai. He stands first in the class and bags prizes in sports and games. She strongly supports the scheme and feels that parents should not grudge paying Rs.5 or Rs.10 to make the centre self-supporting. In fact, the Therivilai preschool is housed in the verandah of Jeyanthi's house. A nominal monthly rent of Rs.10/- is paid to her. In one corner of the verandah, Jeyanthi keeps her handloom and works on it from morning till evening. Would it not be disturbing to the students who share the same verandah?

Not at all, says Miss Sarathabai who has been teaching in the same premises for six years. *We are least disturbed or diverted. The children are so much used to the* "tik tak" *sound of the hand loom , that they do not even feel its existence. Not even the baby of the class, the one-and-a-half year-old Anisha.* But then, she has no other choice, either.

Not only mentally retarded children and hand looms, but even uncontrollable problematic children are so meticulously handled by the preschool teachers as part of the day's work. Shibu was one-and-a-half years old when Mrs. Kanaga Rajam heard about him from another parent and went to see him in his house. He was found tied to the leg of a cot with rope. On seeing a new visitor, the boy struggled to untie the knot, but could not succeed. The parents told the teacher that the boy was very naughty and mischievous. Kanaga Rajam explained to them that Shibu might be very brilliant and hyperactive and it was foolish of them to have imagined him to be a demon. A child is a bundle of love and power, and every child has in him something divine. Children are clear-sighted observers too, and such barbarous acts would upset their morale and psychology. She asked them to release him immediately and carried him to school. Shibu is now two-and a-half years old and the most well-behaved child in the preschool. The parents are very surprised to see the behavioural change in Shibu.

Kanaga Rajam, who has put in 15 years of service in the PWDS pre-school programme, says -

A mothers' meeting held once a month is the best forum to teach child psychology and child care. Exposing the mothers' to new ideas and insights on child rearing is a gratifying experience. Though there are only 18 members in a group,the monthly savings amount to more than Rs.2,000/-. The mothers are willing to contribute even Rs.10/-per month to the school.

The real rewards

Does the teacher meet the alumni now and then? *Quite often,* says, Kanaga Rajam. *My first set of students are now 15 years old and studying at the secondary level. During my house visits I am happy to see my childrens evolve into matured and refined beings. When the younger ones shift from preschools to regular schools, they assume leadership and teach songs and alphabets to the students in the new schools.*

The Thozhikodu preschool is privileged in that it is visited quite often by health workers from the nearby health centre and treated with vitamin pills, polio drops and vaccines. The teacher, Mrs. N. Kamala, and her husband go out every morning to pick up the children. The whole family is involved, and help one another in the school activities.

Even more than their learning experience, the children are very happy in being together in one place. It is an exhilarating

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A child is a bundle of love and power, and every child has in him something divine

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feeling to experience the fun of being a part of child community, and watch them develop social relationshiops in the process.

Mrs. Anand Evangeline, the women's programme coordinator who is also cordinating the preschool programme of the West Zone, says that reaching the preschool child provides easy access to the family, and in a wider sense facilities the total development of the community. Preschool centres make it easier toestablish contact with rural families for enabling economic programmes.

Success stories

Miss Krishnaveni, who coordinates the preschool programme of the East Zone, says that since the preschool system of PWDS is very informal and flexible, no hard and fast rules are laid down regarding admission procedure, syllabus and the working hours of the school. She adds –

The educational need of the community is the primary concern. Children who attend the preschools are really motivated to go to regular schools. It isn't surprising to note that those who have had preschool experience have performed much better than the new entrants. We are also happy to note that the pre-school children do not become drop-outs but get at least their higher secondary certificates. One student holds a Master's degree in Science. Seeing the educational development and behavioural changes of their children, the villagers render full cooperation and willingly provide facilities for conducting classes.

Jeyanthi, whose son was a former student at Therivilai preschool centre, is very proud that her son takes keen interest in his studies in the primary school. Going by the report of the class teacher of her son, she is happy that he performed better in listening comprehension, sequential thinking and personal social skills than the rest of the class who have had no access to preschool education. Jeyanthi's son Livin, when asked whether he liked going to school, nodded in affirmation. He looked smart in neat clothes and was a bit shy to talk to a stranger. When asked for his impression about his preschool days, Livin said with a shy smile -

It was good. I was very happy. The teacher was full of love and kindness. She didn't beat anyone. She taught us many songs.

Does he remember what he learnt in the preschool? Livin was hesitant at first, but when encouraged by the mother, he started reciting in one breath, the rhymes, the alphabets and numbers he had learnt in English. Does he like the present school?

Yes. But the teacher beats all the students quite often. I am spared because I study well. I stand first in the class.

When a few teachers of the Paravai Government Middle School were asked their opinion about the children who have had preschool education, they all unanimously expressed the opinion that these children preformed much better than the rest of the class. Their regular attendance, their readiness

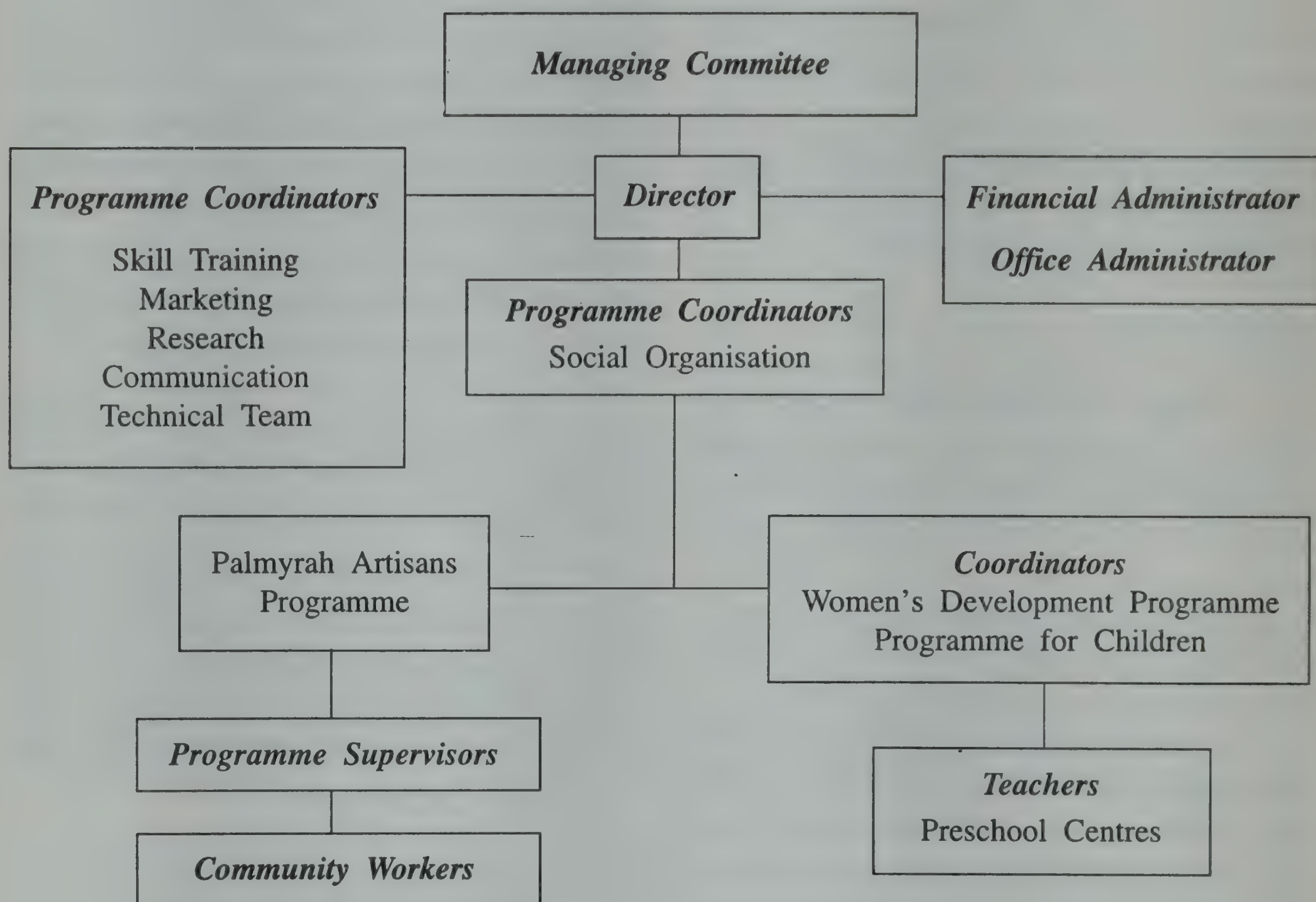


Fig.4 Organogram

to learn, response to teaching inputs and the cordial relationship they maintain with their mates and above all the self-confidence they have developed during the preschool years, make them stand apart.

Opportunities for sharing

For the sake of convenience, the whole project area of PWDS has been divided into East and West Zones, with a Programme Coordinator in charge of each zone. The coordinators directly report to the Director who is helped by the Managing Committee under the Presidentship of Dr. Samuel Amirtham. Each Coordinator is assisted by an office assistant. The West Zone has 51 preschool centres and the East, 55. (Fig 4)

A common meeting for both zones is held once a month, usually on salary day, in which all the pre-school teachers participate. Monthly reports are submitted to the coordinators followed by a discussion, and lesson plans for the next month are planned. Resource persons are invited for special lectures. It is usually an occasion for all the teachers to meet together and share their views and experiences, a day for fun and laughter. Lunch time sees them in groups, sharing and enjoying their meals.

Apart from this, there is a separate meeting at the zonal level every third Saturday. Decisions regarding the celebration of important national and religious festivals are taken at the zonal meetings. Responsibilities are shared after a participatory discussion. A report on the savings collection, attendance in mothers' meetings and the number of houses visited is submitted by each teacher. There is also a sharing session in which interesting events and happenings are shared and reflected upon.

Their regular attendance, their readiness to learn, response to teaching inputs and the cordial relationship they maintain with their mates and above all the self-confidence they have developed during the preschool years, make them stand apart.

5 THE CHILD CARE WORKER

Inspirations

Vijayakumari was 22 years old with a school leaving certificate in her hand. Her native place Pazhawar, Kuzhithurai, in Kanyakumari district, lacked educational facilities. The need for a preschool in the area motivated Vijayakumari to open the first day-care centre on June 1, 1976 in Pazhawar. Twenty seven students in the age group 2 - 4 years were enrolled. Two years later, this centre was recognized by PWDS to receive support. Vijayakumari is now 40 years old with 18 years of service as a child care worker. Initially she received only Rs.50/- as monthly allowance but with an annual increment of Rs.25/-, her present monthly allowance is Rs.300/-.

She recollects the days when she was unemployed, not knowing what to do. The future looked dark and bleak. During a casual talk with one of her friends who was also unemployed, the conversation changed to how best their available time could be used. Why not do something for the community, they thought. The need for early childhood education in the area kindled their desire to open a preschool. When they approached some of the parents, the response was not encouraging. But the persuasive skills and the conviction of these two determined girls won over the villagers. Vijayakumari's family backed her fully, which, she says, was like a tonic. Their relentless efforts soon saw 27 students on roll. As a teacher she derives joy and satisfaction in the presence of children. Her family problems cease to exist the moment she enters the classroom.

In 1979, she got married to a Government employee who had a transferable job. Fortunately for Vijayakumari, her husband saw eye to eye with her commitment and yearning to continue as a teacher. While marriage becomes a handicap for many such teachers to continue their profession, it was a source of strength to Vijayakumari. The husband and wife, after a lengthy discussion, agreed that even if the husband were to be

As a teacher she derives joy and satisfaction in the presence of children. Her family problems cease to exist the moment she enters the classroom.

transferred to some other place, Vijayakumari would stay in Pazhawar. Not only her husband but also her grown-up son is very cooperative. Of course there were times when her family responsibilities almost forced her to leave the job. There were complaints from the family when she came home late after conducting mothers' meetings. On their occasional visits to the school, her husband and son would feel uncomfortable when they saw her cleaning the tiny tots who had answered nature's call right in the middle of the class room. Vijayakumari does not have the help of an ayah but has one more teacher to assist her. At present she has 30 students who are divided into two groups, aged 2 to 3, and above 3 years.

Parents' joy

Unlike the other preschools of the same nature, the Pazhawar centre works full day from 9.30 in the morning till 4.30 in the evening. It is indeed a whole day relief for the parents. The day starts with Vijayakumari ushering in the children. She always finds some nice words to say to the children and the parents who escort them. There is no fixed monthly contribution from the parents. Those who can afford it, pay Rs.5/- and those who can't, pay Rs.2/-, while some do not pay at all. But whatever amount is paid is received without grudge or complaint. Vijayakumari collects Rs.5000/- per month by way of small savings and sometimes reaches more than Rs.70,000/- per annum. She receives not less than Rs.200/- per month as incentive for mobilising savings, calculated at the rate of 4% of the total amount collected. She has also won a special prize for collecting the maximum amount in a year.

After a few months in the centre, the twins were the most well-behaved children in the class. They even assumed leadership of the class during the second year and were found to be very friendly, cordial and helpful to their mates

Does she have any memorable moments to talk about? There is the incident of the twins brought to the school by the mother. The children wouldn't go to anyone at all except the mother. Even the father and the elder children in the family could not enjoy the pleasure of carrying the beautiful twins in their arms. To add to this, they were naughty and whined most of the time. If anyone tried to cajole them, they would beat or spit at the person. After a few months in the centre, the twins were the most well-behaved children in the class. They even assumed leadership

of the class during the second year and were found to be very friendly, cordial and helpful to their mates. Vijayakumari is very happy to note that the twins after completing preschool are now scoring well in all the subjects in the Government primary school.

The teacher benefits too

Has her involvement in the preschool programme contributed in anyway to her growth? *Certainly,* says Vijayakumari. *Eighteen years ago when I decided to involve myself in the preschool programme, I was timid, shy and uncommunicative. I did not even have basic knowledge about child psychology or pre-primary education. I was totally ignorant about men and matters. But now, the several training programmes I have attended in Bangalore, Madurai, Kanyakumari and other places have helped me to evolve as a better teacher. The associations and contacts I have established with parents, resource persons and Government officials have opened my eyes to the outer world. Such contacts make me feel that I am loved and respected by people around me. This has given me more self confidence and enhanced my self-esteem. I have also developed myself as a good public speaker. I never hesitate to raise questions in monthly meetings and public forums. I feel elated as I gain new insights day by day. I also believe that the more I receive the more I should give.*

A glorious experience

Miss A. Glory Little Jaya, a single preschool teacher at the Kunna Vilagam centre, has her Higher Secondary Certificate with a certificate in Teacher Training. Her father, who is 55 years old, is a quarry worker. She has four brothers younger than her and an elder sister. Her elder sister is unemployed. Her father's work is seasonal and affected by rain and other natural calamities.

How did she become a preschool teacher? Since the family was finding it difficult to make both ends meet, Glory requested a friend of hers working as a preschool teacher to help her find a job which might bring in an income of at least Rs.100/- per month. When she approached PWDS through her friend, she was asked whether there were enough children in her area to start a preschool centre. The need for community participation was also stressed. Glory then conducted a survey, identified some children, and started a preschool centre with the help of the elders from the community.

Does her present job in any way contribute to solving the financial problem of the family? Glory says that her earning is the major regular income for the family, and meets the basic needs of the family. Her remuneration has also helped to buy books and note-books for her brothers.

If Glory has become a preschool teacher mainly for solving her financial burden, will she join some other organisation if more remuneration is offered? *Never,* says Glory. *There are caste problems in centres run by several others. There is no job security either. A teacher is appointed or dismissed at the whim and fancy of the management. Besides,*

there is no scope for working independently. Since this centre has been started with the support of a secular non-government organisation, the whole community, irrespective of caste or creed, own the centre as theirs. I am indeed proud to associate with such a centre.

Glory has 20 children in her centre who contribute Rs.5/- each per month. This amount was decided by the parents themselves, who willingly pay their share every month. The local Primary Health Centre supplies basic medicines free of cost to the children. Is it possible for the centre to become self-supporting?

Not in the near future. The community will find it very difficult to support the teacher and maintain the centre. If the monthly contribution of parents is gradually increased over a period of time, self-reliance might become a reality in the future.

Mutual benefits

Has her seven years of experience helped her personal growth? *Without any doubt,* says Glory. *I have acquired communication and presentation skills. My stage fear has disappeared. I don't feel self conscious while in a group. The community gives me a lot of respect. When I attend weddings and other functions in the community,*

The whole community, irrespective of caste or creed, own the centre as theirs.

I am specially honoured for being the teacher of their children. My family members also treat me as a special case. More than the amount I earn, the very fact that I am occupied earns me respect. I am also able to mix easily with a lot of people when I go out for savings collection. The training programmes I have attended have proved very useful, much more than the formal Teacher Training Course I have finished. Besides, nothing can deprive me of the joy and satisfaction I get from being an instrument of change in the lives of poor children.

Is she happy with her work? *Oh, sure!,* says Chandramathi. *I derive immense pleasure through my association with the small kids. The home visits during the afternoons and the mothers' meeting once a month make me feel that I am contributing my mite to society. The monthly allowance of Rs.275/- from PWDS, the 4% incentive from the savings amount I collect and the small fee paid by the parents help my family to a large extent.*

Kamalabai, with an unemployed husband and two children, says that the income she receives from PWDS is very useful. But the joy she receives through her work is much more than any money could compensate. She has a regular attendance of twenty persons in the mothers' meetings and is able to collect not less than Rs.1,000/- through the Savings Scheme. She has now motivated the mothers to pay a monthly contribution of Rs.5/- to the school to make it self-supporting. Appendix 2 gives a demographic profile of the teachers.

6 COSTS AND BENEFITS

While the impression of parents and teachers on the spread of education in the community give an indication of the impact of the programme, the costs and benefits have also to be considered from a financial angle. Table 4 shows the expenses under various heads for community preschools.

Table 4 **Expenses of community preschools**

	Rs.
Educational materials purchased for the centres	57,584
Training for teachers	29,856
Administrative expenses like stationery, postage etc.	2,449
Allowance to teachers	3,63,200
Miscellaneous	566
Total	4,53,655

The cost per child works out to Rs. 174/- per year and the cost per centre Rs. 4279/- per year. These costs include only the recurring expenditure, since the village people provide a place free of cost for running the centre.

A comparison has been attempted between the cost of a preschool run by PWDS and one set up by a private institution in Kanyakumari District. (Table 5)

The cost per child here is Rs.340 per year, or one-and-a-half times that of the community preschool.

Table 5 **Expenses of a private preschool**

Non-recurring	Rs.
Cost of building (240 sq.ft @ Rs.220 per sq.ft)	52,800
Furniture for the school	5,000
Total	57,800
Recurring (for 25 children)	
Educational material	1,000
Administrative expenses	1,000
Allowance to teachers @ Rs.500/- per month for a period of 12 months	6,000
Miscellaneous	500
Total	8,500

As far as non-recurring costs go, if the depreciation/maintenance is taken to be about Rs.6000 per year or Rs.500 a month, this is ultimately recovered from the parents through fees, where as the "free" accomodation given to PWDS is a cost voluntarily borne by the community.

It is significant that the expenses of PWDS include training of teachers, an item which is missing in the private institution. On an average, an amount of Rs.280 per year is spent in training per teacher, and Rs.3420 on allowances per teacher.

Educational achievements

Figures for Kanyakumari District as a whole show a sharp increase in the number of high and higher secondary schools and enrolment of both boys and girls between 1971 and 1991, while the number of primary schools and students at this level have remained more or less static. This may be an indication that fewer children are dropping out after primary school. The dramatic increase in literacy rates for the same period (from 64% to 75% for men and from 52% to 69% for women) could also have come about only because marginalised illiterates became literate. (Appendix 3)

Though these statistics cannot be directly linked to the impact of these community preschools, it has been observed that children who attend the preschool develop the habit of regularly attending classes after joining other schools. They do not generally become drop-outs as they at least finish their higher secondary level. It is estimated that of the 14,000 children from the preschools who have enrolled in school, only 142 dropped out without completing high school.

Employment

While it is difficult to quantify the benefits received from the preschools, a look at the employment generated by them shows that 106 teachers have been given employment in as many Centres, or to put it differently, for every 4279 rupees spent, one employment has been generated. The teachers have expressed that the monthly allowance of Rs.275/- from PWDS, the 4% incentive from the savings amount and the contribution paid by parents totalling Rs.490/- altogether makes a lot of difference to them. The total benefit thus obtained by 106 teachers in the year 1993-94 through this programme can be said to be Rs.6,23,280/-.*

Table 6 **Average income of a teacher**

	Rs.
Support from PWDS	285
For Health Care (Lay First Aider Work)	50
Margin in medicine sale	30
4% incentive from savings	50
Fee collection (20 children)	75
Total	490

** Financial Analysis : S. Dhanalakshmi B.E., M.B.A., Lecturer, Thiagaraja School of Management, Madurai and Senior Consultant, DATA.*

Intangible gains

There are some other gains too, that cannot be quantified, but are revealed by the salient characteristics of the programme.

• The preschool teacher is identified from the village and trained, a modest attempt to identify and develop local leadership.

• Community participation is given the utmost importance. The preschool centres are mostly initiated by the community with all the members extending their full cooperation. PWDS comes in only as a support organisation providing training to the teachers, educational materials for the children and coordination to the centres.

• Even though the allowance paid to the teacher by PWDS, which mostly comes from overseas donor agencies, is not enough, attempts have been made to enhance the income of the teacher through collection of fees, incentive for savings mobilisation and allowance for health care.

• The preschool teacher is seen not as a mere teacher, but also as a multipurpose community worker. The programme is basically community-based and PWDS acts only as an enabler of the community rather than an employer of the teachers.

• The parents, especially the mothers, relieved from the burden of baby-sitting, are able to go to work and earn some extra income.

• Though the society was formed to uplift the palmyrah workers, the beneficiaries of the preschool programme include the agricultural labourers, coolies and other rural artisans in the area.

The preschool teacher is seen not as a mere teacher, but also as a multipurpose community worker. The programme is basically community-based and PWDS acts only as an enabler of the community rather than an employer of the teachers.

7 CHALLENGES AND DILEMMAS

The development of community preschools took place even though preschool education was not a priority to PWDS. Since the need for preschool emerged along with the other needs related to health and hygiene, one person had to play multiple roles of being a teacher-cum-community worker-cum-health care worker. The role spanned many activities such as savings mobilisation, health care, home visits and organising self-help groups and the education of children itself was not the focus of concentration. The teacher had little time to prepare her lessons or learning materials for the children. Since most of her time and energy was sapped by other activities, the teacher had little scope to display her enthusiasm and creativity in school activities. While at home, she was also fully engaged in household work. So, the teacher with too many irons on the fire, may not be able to ensure an effective preschool programme.

Role of a supervisor

Effective supervision is yet another major challenge. Today, the two coordinators of the East and West Zone, have the additional responsibility of supervising all the 106 centres, an all too daunting task. There should be at least one supervisor for 10 centres, implying a minimum requirement of 6 to 8 supervisors at the initial stage to cover all the centres. Regular supervision by someone who is an enabler and guide can enhance the efficiency and motivate teachers.

The issue of sustainability

The question of sustainability and self-reliance is another matter to ponder upon. It is very doubtful whether the teacher, as a first step, could become self- reliant. Even though it is a community-based programme, the community is not in a position to financially support the teacher. The teachers' income is mostly dependent on the support of PWDS, which in turn is dependent on overseas donor agencies. In case the flow of funds from foreign funding agencies is blocked, PWDS may not be able to extend the support hitherto rendered. What will happen to the existing preschool centres then? Will the community, having tasted the fruits of education, come forward to own the

The teacher with too many irons in the fire, may not be able to ensure an effective preschool programme.

centre fully? It is possible and positive signs can be seen.

At the same time, if the centre becomes self-supporting and fully-owned by the community, does it not face the danger of being usurped by the power structure in the village, resulting in converting the centre into a commercial venture, levying monthly and special fees which cannot be afforded by the poor, thus indirectly restricting access for education to the children of the 'haves' only? Such privatisation might also lead to the appointment of regular teachers who believe in placing emphasis on children's uniform and other paraphernalia like shoes, socks, tie and uniform. The consequences would be the marginalisation of the poor children and the attention to the educational needs of the poor going back to zero. PWDS is not unaware of this possibility and is engaged in a debate on the kind of intervention and the stand to be taken when such problems arise.

Improving infrastructure

There is no denying the fact that working conditions are poor as far as the infrastructure is concerned. The need for more space, lack of toilet facilities, inadequate learning materials and inconvenient seating facilities are things that could be easily pointed out by any casual visitor. But considering that this programme is an outcome of community organisation and is partially supported by the rural poor, one can appreciate the need for the programme to fit into the existing ecology. Will the community be able to upgrade the infrastructure? This is yet another challenge.

Even though the community is very keen to contribute a place for the preschool, owing to its poor economic conditions, it is often difficult to find a suitable place free of cost for the school. PWDS pays a minimal rent to some schools. Community members could be motivated to either provide a place in the village for their own school, or to erect a temporary shed on public land using free labour and locally available resources.

New forms of support

The allowance given to the teachers by PWDS is very meagre in relation to the quantum of work they do. Though the teachers find the allowance useful,

If the centre becomes self-supporting and fully-owned by the community, does it not face the danger of being usurped by the power structure in the village, restricting access for education to the children of the 'haves' only?



A tapper family



Sharing community space

based on the philosophy that something is better than nothing, yet in these hard times of spiralling prices and upward inflation, unless the Government, the community, the donor agencies and the voluntary agencies jointly do something to enhance the income of the teachers, it will amount to nothing short of exploitation.

To overcome this, PWDS is now thinking of creating an endowment for sustainability with a matching grant, the contributors being the community, and donors from the public. PWDS is also gearing up to join hands with other concerned voluntary agencies to pressurise the Government to provide preschool education to the children as their constitutional right.

Though some feeding centres were run during the first few years with the support of the food aid given by CASA, it had to stop as the scheme was closed. No food is provided at the centres at present. Some children bring food and some go home for lunch. A small-scale nutrition supplementation programme could be initiated, seeking financial assistance from Government nutrition programmes and other funding agencies.

Quality of education

The content and quality of early childhood education has to be revised after consulting educationists specialising in preschool education. At present, the teachers, not knowing what to do, tend to copy the system of English-medium education and imitate the traditional teaching methodologies. Earlier, the trainers for the teachers were themselves not specialists in the area, and the organisers were not aware of the importance of play-way methods in learner-centered education. Since PWDS did not see preschool education as a central task, not much thought was given to improve the content and quality of preschool education.

The training needs of the teachers have not adequately been fulfilled. Since they were involved in multiple roles, they had attended varieties of training programmes, but not enough on education. Due to lack of proper orientation and guidance, and as was the expectation of the parents too, they clung on to the age-old system of repetition, recitation and rote learning, that too in an alien tongue. This is totally irrelevant in their context as the children will enter into Tamil-medium primary schools after preschool education.

To overcome this, PWDS is now thinking of creating an endowment for sustainability with a matching grant, the contributors being the community, and donors from the public.

Topics for discussion in the monthly meetings were decided depending on the availability of local resource persons. Training programmes and workshops on concept clarifications on the content and quality of preschool education, the need for playway methods, preparation of educational aids and materials for activity-oriented learning are the dire need of the teachers today.

Since the teachers were involved in multiple roles, they had attended varieties of training programmes, but not enough on education.

The organisers began realising this need only recently, and conducted a five-day workshop last year, on early childhood education, for a group of 30 teachers representing various NGOs. Since then, efforts are on to modify and strengthen the existing curriculum, making it appropriate and contextual. PWDS has proposed to conduct several training programmes for the teachers during 1995-96, as it considers that spending for training is not an expenditure but a wise investment, since the quality of education is directly linked to training and supervision.

Teachers and parents

But more than the early childhood education training, the qualities of the child care workers are commendable. The love, sincerity, devotion and care of the teacher have created an indelible mark and lasting impression on the children. To them, the child care worker is a person with motherly qualities. The quality of the teacher has assumed even greater importance than the quality of the programme or the training. The success of the PWDS preschool programme, inspite of some of its limitations, can largely be attributed to the child care worker who embodies and personifies the spirit of dedication.

As the perception of the organisation changes towards shifting to a meaningful and relevant preschool education, a conflict is likely to arise between the perceptions of the community and that of the organisation. The expectations of the community are based on the kind of education system in vogue, however irrelevant, and parents are frequently unaware of the psychological damage caused to the children by such a system. It is for the organisation to create awareness and awakening in this regard through seminars, workshops and training programmes for the parents to carry them along with the new system.

The problem of child care cannot be solved by replicating traditional models of highly institutionalised creches and child care services fully subsidised by Government funds or by emphasis on 'professionalisation' of personnel with rigid requirements of formal institutional training, degrees and diplomas. It has to be tackled by encouragement and support extended to community-based attempts of the people and by providing support and guidance to the 'untrained.' The model developed by PWDS is worth studying as an innovative example. It has no claims to perfection, but illustrates a process of development that could well be an inspiration to others.

The problem of child care cannot be solved by replicating traditional models of highly institutionalised creches and child care services fully subsidised by Government funds or by emphasis on 'professionalisation' of personnel with rigid requirements of formal institutional training, degrees and diplomas

Appendix 1

PALMYRAH WORKERS' DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY

A community-based programme may be defined as one that is initiated, sustained and implemented with the participation of the community. The word itself connotes people's involvement and participation at every stage. The 191 palmyrah workers' *mantrams*, 124 Women's *Mantrams* and 106 Mother Groups and the emerging 20 self-help groups are the outcome of the enabling role of PWDS and the active participation of people in this attempt at development. Though this is a participatory process in which various changes have taken place at different stages, the process still continues but with new thrust and even greater participation of the people. After initial teething problems, the members of the PWDS mobilised resources, managed revolving funds, provided support for members in legal issues and identified beneficiaries among themselves for the housing and other schemes.

Current schemes

1. Community health - with emphasis on preventive measures
2. Habitat Resource Centre (HRC) - a movement which raises the quality of life and gives recognition and human dignity to the palmyrah workers
3. Team for Income Generation and Product Promotion Support (TIPS) - which enhances the income of palmyrah workers by providing support services
4. Centre for Rural Employment and Skill Training (CREST) - which creates participatory support systems like group enterprises and federation of groups to take care of skill training, resource mobilsation and marketing in an organised way
5. Family Counselling Centre (FCC) - which organises awareness programmes on rights of women and trains rural women to develop leadership qualities.
6. Self-help Groups - which encourage women to save and introduce revolving loan schemes and credit systems.
7. Development Association for Training and Technology Appropriation (DATA) - which offers professional support for community development programmes

Future concerns include :

- Strengthening the *mantrams* towards self-management by encouraging them to take up more responsibilities and minimising the direct role of the community workers

- Raising local resources and encouraging participation of the formal institutions to support the community-based organisations
- Motivating and initiating more self-help groups which are self-managed and self-sustainable
- Strengthening the women's movement by supporting their initiatives
- Dissemination of know-how in community-based income generation to other interested groups in Tamil Nadu
- Coordinating the development programmes of palmyrah workers by a network of voluntary development organisations with a package programme

As a result of PWDS intervention, the tapper community, over the years, has evolved into a strong, well-informed and self-confident force.

Appendix 2

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE TEACHERS

	Percentages
Age level	
21-25 years	11.60
26-30 years	13.90
31-35 years	26.90
36-40 years	18.60
41-45 years	19.70
45 and above	9.30
Educational qualification	
SSLC	68.20
H.Sc.	27.10
College	4.70
Professional qualification	
Teaching	9.45
Tailoring	12.26
Typewriting	15.09
Printing	1.88
None	61.32
No. of in-service training programmes attended	
1 - 2	27.71
3 - 5	59.04
Above 5	61.32
Marital status	
Single	26.75
Married	69.76
Widow	3.50

	Percentages
Years of experience	
0-3 years	6.00
4-6 years	19.70
7-9 years	33.60
10-12 years	10.50
13-15 years	18.60
16-19 years	11.60
Father's/Husband's occupation	
Tapper	75.03
Business	7.81
Clerk	4.68
Conductor	3.12
Driver	1.56
Farmer	4.68
Teacher	1.56
Govt. employee	1.56
No. of family members	
1 - 3	37.60
4 - 5	44.70
6 and above	17.70
Family income in Rs.	
Below 300	15.29
301-500	47.08
501-750	11.76
751-1000	14.11
Above 1000	11.76

Appendix 3

ENROLMENT IN RECOGNISED SCHOOLS IN KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT

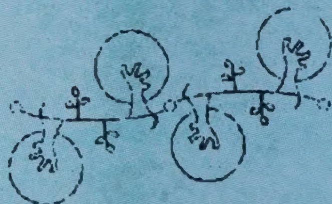
Year	Primary schools			Middle schools			High schools			Hr. Secondary schools		
	No.	Boys	Girls	No.	Boys	Girls	No.	Boys	Girls	No.	Boys	Girls
1981-82	353	63528	62166	123	42540	39807	81	26267	21173	68	47818	28972
1982-83	349	65987	69246	136	43535	40794	86	27793	22674	68	46589	28168
1983-84	347	58762	60272	142	50059	46309	97	36433	29421	68	44005	28896
1984-85	347	66153	66339	141	44539	40690	98	33325	27682	68	47125	31115
1985-86	346	55132	60176	142	37284	34446	95	29900	25965	71	46768	NA*
1986-87	346	55637	60326	142	37475	34676	95	37432	37400	71	49976	43195
1988-89	332	55075	54948	159	44669	40332	122	34901	37403	81	49943	48727
1989-90	326	62988	63349	160	NA	NA	100	NA	NA	200	NA	NA
1990-91	330	NA	NA	161	NA	NA	116	NA	NA	90	NA	NA
1991-92	325	65103	64889	156	42508	39476	139	36565	41644	98	55235	50585
1992-93	333	70390	69553	154	40217	36758	141	37052	42600	98	60129	54227
1993-94	330	75139	65051	158	44056	40210	144	40031	45082	93	67710	51339

*Note : figures for 1987-88 not available; * NA : Not available*

Source : District Statistical Handbook, issues for various years, Statistical Office, Nagercoil, Kanyakumari District.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The SURAKSHA series documents innovative programmes of Early Childhood Care and Education in India, especially those which address the intersecting needs of women, young children and girls. Carefully researched and written by scholars in the field, each study looks in depth at one programme, highlighting its achievements, philosophy and goals. The series as a whole represents the rich diversity of experience within the country, with a range in terms of geography, auspices and organisational pattern. Scholars and students of Child Development and child welfare would find the series an invaluable source of information, as would policy makers, voluntary agencies and others concerned with programming for women's and children's development.



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